

## **“Your Tired, Your Poor, Your Huddled Masses”: American Responses to the Indochinese and Syrian Refugee Crises**

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In 2015, in the midst of the European migrant crisis, the United States admitted 10,000 Syrian refugees. This was but a miniscule portion of the 4.9 million refugees who had been displaced by the war in the Syrian Arab Republic by the end of that year, and paled in comparison to the efforts of many European nations. That the U.S. commitment to receive and resettle Syrian refugees in 2015 was so small, and that even this low figure served to attract substantial criticism and dismay, is indicative of the divisive nature of the issue of refugee resettlement in the United States. This attitude of reluctance and even animosity toward refugee resettlement is stark in contrast to the expansive American commitment to refugees forty years prior during the height of the Indochinese refugee crisis when, between fall 1978 and the end of 1980, over 166,000 refugees from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia entered the United States. This study examines the discourses surrounding refugee resettlement in the United States during the Indochinese refugee crisis of the late 1970s and the ongoing European migrant crisis, with a focus on how the political context of these crises shaped the response of the American government and public. Ultimately, this research demonstrates how foreign policy concerns, domestic political culture, and conceptions of American identity all contribute to determining the extent to which Americans welcome or reject the world’s refugees in times of crisis.

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On November 9, 2016, U.S. presidential candidates Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton met in the second presidential debate of the year’s election. When asked about his proposal to ban Muslims from entering the United States, Trump turned to the European migrant crisis. “They’re coming in by the tens of thousands because of Barack Obama,” he declared, “and Hillary Clinton wants to allow a 550 percent increase over Obama.” The danger, Trump claimed, was that “people are coming into our country, like we have no idea who they are, where they’re from, what their feeling about our country is, and she wants 550 percent more.” By Trump’s interpretation, the “hundreds of thousands of people coming in from Syria” were in fact “the greatest Trojan horse of all time.” Clinton countered Trump’s security concerns by affirming that she would “not let anyone into our country that I think poses a risk to us.” She further invoked a

sense of humanitarian duty, referring to the “children suffering in this catastrophic [Syrian civil] war,” and asserting that the nation had to “do our part. We are by no means carrying anywhere near the load that Europe and others are.” In fact, the United States had admitted only ten thousand Syrian refugees in the preceding year, rather than the “hundreds of thousands” that Trump claimed.<sup>1</sup> This was but a miniscule portion of the 4.9 million refugees who had been displaced by the war in the Syrian Arab Republic by the end of 2015, and paled in comparison to the efforts of European nations such as Germany and Sweden, which had granted asylum to 140,910 and 32,215 refugees, respectively, that year.<sup>2</sup>

That the U.S. commitment to receive and resettle Syrian refugees in 2015 was so small, and that even this low figure served to attract substantial criticism and dismay, is indicative of the divisive nature of the issue of refugee resettlement in the United States. This attitude of reluctance and even animosity toward refugee resettlement is stark in contrast to the expansive American commitment to refugees forty years previous during the height of the Indochinese refugee crisis when, between fall 1978 and the end of 1980, over 166,000 refugees from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia entered the United States.<sup>3</sup> This essay examines the discourses surrounding refugee resettlement in the United States during the Indochinese refugee crisis of the late 1970s and the ongoing European migrant crisis, with a focus on how the political context of these crises shaped the response of American government and public. By comparing Americans’ acceptance and perception of refugees during these crises, I suggest some factors as to why the United States’ policies toward the resettlement of persecuted populations could be so disparate in the space of four decades. Ultimately, this analysis demonstrates how foreign policy concerns, domestic political culture, and shifting senses of American identity all contribute to determining the extent to which American government and public welcomes or rejects the world’s refugees in times of crisis.<sup>4</sup>

As Carl J. Bon Tempo has written, the refugee crisis in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia can be divided into three general phases. The first, from 1965 to 1975, coincided with the height of American involvement in the Vietnam War. By 1971, the war had created over 6 million refugees in Vietnam and over 700,000 in Laos, with a small but growing population of refugees

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<sup>1</sup> NPR Staff, “Fact Check: Clinton and Trump Debate for the 2nd Time,” *NPR*, October 9, 2016. <http://www.npr.org/2016/10/09/497056227/fact-check-clinton-and-trump-debate-for-the-second-time>

<sup>2</sup> UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2015*, June 20, 2016, 3, <http://www.unhcr.org/statistics/unhcrstats/576408cd7/unhcr-global-trends-2015.html>. “Migrant crisis: Migration to Europe explained in seven charts,” *BBC News*, March 4, 2016. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34131911>

<sup>3</sup> Carl J. Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate: The United States and Refugees During the Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 151.

<sup>4</sup> While I focus here on the *dominant* discourses in political culture regarding the admittance of refugees in each case, the vocal opposition against prevailing refugee policy that existed during the Vietnamese and Syrian refugee crises is another area essential to a fuller understanding of the American public’s reception of refugees, and represents an area for further study.

in Cambodia.<sup>5</sup> During these years, American policy towards refugees focused on provisions of food and aid, and prioritized resettlement in refugees' native countries rather than in the United States. Politically, such a refugee strategy allowed the U.S. to aid refugees while committing its resources to stabilizing and strengthening U.S. allies in the region. In addition, the resettlement of South Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian refugees in the United States would have signalled military and government leaders' doubt in the possibility of American success in war.<sup>6</sup>

The second stage of the refugee crisis in Indochina began in May 1975, in the aftermath of the Fall of Saigon and South Vietnam, and continued until the end of 1976. During this period, the defeat of South Vietnam and the withdrawal of U.S. troops forced a change in the American approach to refugees.<sup>7</sup> In mid-April 1975, U.S. State Department officials began defining what exactly this commitment would be. The plan they drew up called for the evacuation of eighteen thousand Vietnamese personnel who had been employed by the United States. At the time, State Department and military officials feared that the victorious North Vietnamese communist government would seek retribution and persecute those Vietnamese who had ties to American forces.<sup>8</sup> In late April, as the fall of Saigon loomed imminent, President Gerald Ford increased this commitment and authorized the evacuation and parole of up to 200,000 Vietnamese persons deemed high-risk, which was approved by the U.S. Congress through the 1975 Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act.<sup>9</sup> Included under the expanded program were former employees, "individuals with knowledge of sensitive U.S. intelligence," political leaders, intellectuals, and "former communist defectors." In addition, the Department of Justice created provisions for employees of American firms and volunteer agencies, along with those who fell under the broad designation of "participants in U.S. sponsored programs."<sup>10</sup> Between April 21 and early May, 65,000 Vietnamese were evacuated by the American military under this program. An additional 65,000 fled on other transport, and were taken into protective custody.<sup>11</sup>

The final and most substantial phase of the Indochinese refugee crisis began in mid-1977 and ran until early 1980.<sup>12</sup> The victory of communist forces in Vietnam in 1975 had been accompanied by that of the Pathet Lao in Laos and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, and by 1977, tens of thousands had fled from these regimes to refugee camps in Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia. As the State Department realized that refugee arrivals were slowly growing, President Jimmy Carter asked for a new refugee strategy with three guidelines: first, priority for resettlement in the United States would be given to refugees with family members in the U.S. or those who

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<sup>5</sup> Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate*, 145.

<sup>6</sup> Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate*, 145.

<sup>7</sup> Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate*, 145.

<sup>8</sup> Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate*, 145-146.

<sup>9</sup> Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate*, 146.

<sup>10</sup> *United States Statutes at Large*, 1975, vol. 89, quoted in Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate*, 146.

<sup>11</sup> Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate*, 146.

<sup>12</sup> Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate*, 145.

possessed needed skills; second, the program would be large enough to give some relief to refugee host countries; third, the U.S. would not commit to an open-ended program. In January 1978, Carter announced that the government would receive 7,000 refugees, a number later increased to 25,000 for the year.<sup>13</sup>

Carter was forced to modify his politically safe and moderate refugee plan in late 1978 due to three developments in Southeast Asia. First, the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia led Cambodian peasants, now refugees, to flee to safety in Thailand. Second, the Pathet Lao in Laos intensified its extermination campaign against those affiliated with the previous government, which had been supported by the U.S.<sup>14</sup> Third, in a campaign directed against the ethnic Chinese Hoa minority, the Vietnamese government began forcibly resettling those in urban areas to the countryside, imprisoning people in re-education camps, and nationalizing private businesses. As it became clear that the communist regime saw no place for the Hoa in Vietnam and even began deporting the Hoa to China, thousands escaped by boat to neighbouring countries.<sup>15</sup>

Together, these three catastrophes led tens of thousands of refugees to take to the water in leaky crafts in search of safety in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Between October and December 1978, nearly fifty thousand refugees arrived in ports. In March 1979, 13,000 landed; in April, 26,000; in May, 51,000; and in June, 56,000. These numbers did not account for the additional twenty-five to fifty percent of refugees who perished en route, nor those whose boats were turned away at landing by overwhelmed government authorities.<sup>16</sup> In response to this massive and growing crisis, Carter announced in November 1978 that the United States would take in 21,000 refugees over the next six months. In April 1979, the Carter administration committed to resettling 7,000 refugees a month; within three months, this figure increased to 14,000 per month. In this way, the United States resettled some 400,000 refugees between 1975 and 1980.<sup>17</sup>

The American commitment to refugees from Indochina during the late 1970s can be partially attributed to foreign policy concerns. The failure of the American armed forces after an extended engagement in Vietnam led the liberal left to argue that American foreign policy should be guided not by anti-communist ideology, as it had been since the end of the Second World War, but rather by a commitment to human rights.<sup>18</sup> In explaining Carter's decision to allow such an influx of Indochinese refugees into the country, Carter's administration invoked notions of

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<sup>13</sup> Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate*, 148.

<sup>14</sup> Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate*, 149.

<sup>15</sup> Justin Huynh, "Tales of the Boat People: Comparing Refugee Resettlement in the Vietnamese and Syrian Refugee Crisis," *Columbia Human Rights Law Review* 28, no. 1 (Fall 2016): 202-203.

<sup>16</sup> Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate*, 149. As Bon Tempo describes, even ships that came across "boat people" at sea were reluctant to rescue refugees, for fear that they themselves would be responsible for refugees their governments refused to take in.

<sup>17</sup> Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate*, 150-151.

<sup>18</sup> Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate*, 133.

human dignity and human rights. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance described the crisis as “first and foremost a human tragedy of appalling proportions,” while Deputy Secretary of State Richard Holbrooke said that the refugees were fleeing “intolerable circumstances.”<sup>19</sup> In a December 1978 speech at a White House ceremony in honour of the thirtieth anniversary of the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Carter characterized refugees as “the living, homeless casualties of one very important failure on the part of the world to live by the principles of peace and human rights.” “To help these refugees,” Carter continued, “is a simple duty.” “Human rights is the soul of our foreign policy,” Carter proclaimed, for indeed, “human rights is the soul of our sense of nationhood.”<sup>20</sup> For Carter and his administration, the matter of aiding refugees fleeing from persecution and turmoil was a matter of foreign policy, and of a foreign policy that centered on the notion of inalienable human rights.

While the liberal left seized upon the refugee crisis in Southeast Asia as a means to act upon their conception of American foreign policy as directed by human rights, American neoconservatives, Bon Tempo has argued, supported the resettlement of refugees because it allowed them to condemn communist nations for their human rights records.<sup>21</sup> As Bon Tempo has outlined, this strand of neo-conservatism emerged in the Richard Nixon era, when neoconservatives felt that Nixon’s conciliatory approach towards détente with the Soviet Union had led to a tolerance and condoning of the Soviet Union. This, in turn, legitimized communism and Soviet power. For these neoconservatives, the public condemnation of the Soviet Union and other communist nations by American leaders – for instance, through the acceptance of refugees whose human rights were trampled upon by communist governments – would serve to strengthen anti-communism. Thus, neoconservatives integrated human rights concerns into their more dominant anti-communism apprehensions.<sup>22</sup> Supporting these Southeast Asian refugees who were escaping communist governments thus enabled neoconservatives to condemn communist powers while safeguarding the human rights of refugees. Though liberals and neoconservatives held divergent foreign policy agendas, their common concern with human rights created a bipartisan coalition in support of protecting and promoting the human rights of refugee populations.

The American decision to welcome hundreds of thousands of refugees during the Indochinese refugee crisis was affected not only by externally oriented foreign policy concerns, but also developments in domestic political culture. The 1975 evacuation and resettlement of Vietnamese refugees, which focused on those who had been employed by U.S. forces, former employees, and their allies, and which was driven by concern that the communist government would punish those with connections to the United States, reveals a sense of American obligation or

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<sup>19</sup> Cyrus Vance and Richard Holbrooke, quoted in Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate*, 133.

<sup>20</sup> Jimmy Carter, “Universal Declaration of Human Rights Remarks at a White House Meeting Commemorating the 30th Anniversary of the Declaration’s Signing,” December 6, 1978, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=30264>

<sup>21</sup> Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate*, 138.

<sup>22</sup> Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate*, 138-139.

responsibility for the fallout that would result from U.S. intervention in Vietnam.<sup>23</sup> As David W. Haines as argued, the refugees fleeing Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos were not only fleeing communist governments but also circumstances exacerbated by U.S. intervention. As a result, refugee admissions became a moral commitment and “a partial restitution” for American failures in war.<sup>24</sup> This feeling of guilt for the suffering of refugees and a duty to alleviate their suffering was reflected in the *New York Times*, which published an editorial under the headline “Our Vietnam Duty is Not Over,” in which the author declared that, despite Thai authorities’ responsibility for the abuses that befell the refugees they turned away, “the American responsibility is even heavier.”<sup>25</sup> Elsewhere, a *New Republic* opinion piece on debates concerning parole for refugees ended with a reminder that “these Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees have the strongest possible claim on our compassion, since we are largely responsible for their plight.”<sup>26</sup>

Another major aspect of U.S. political culture that laid the groundwork for the acceptance of hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese refugees during the late 1970s was the legacies of the freedom movements of the 1960s. The successes of the African American civil rights movement and the women’s rights movement had shifted American attitudes about race and gender, and had championed the notion of individual rights. By reinvigorating the human rights movement, the freedom movements of the 1960s created a more welcoming environment for the Southeast Asian refugees of the 1970s.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, Bon Tempo has noted that the admission of Laotian, Cambodian, and Vietnamese refugees to the United States marked an important departure from U.S. refugee policy, because it disturbed the ‘refugee equals European, anti-communist’ foundation of post-World War II American refugee policies.<sup>28</sup>

A final factor that contributed to Americans’ acceptance of a large number of Indochinese refugees during the late 1970s was a shifting conception of American identity and of who could be considered, or become, American. This is especially evident a proposals for television commercials that the firm Educational Systems Corporation (ESC) created in response to a commission from the President’s Advisory Committee on Refugees for a publicity campaign to build public support for the refugees.<sup>29</sup> The firm proposed that the publicity campaign should “focus . . . on the individuality of the refugees” rather than presenting them as “a faceless, hopeless mass of people.”<sup>30</sup> However, ESC rejected the idea of portraying the refugees as fully embracing American culture, for:

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<sup>23</sup> Huynh, “Tales of the Boat People,” 202.

<sup>24</sup> David W. Haines, *Safe Haven? A History of Refugees in America* (Sterling, VA: Kumarian Press, 2010), 5.

<sup>25</sup> “Our Vietnam Duty is Not Over,” *New York Times*, February 28, 1978.

<sup>26</sup> “Indochinese Refugees,” *New Republic*, March 25, 1978, 10.

<sup>27</sup> Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate*, 5.

<sup>28</sup> Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate*, 5, 9.

<sup>29</sup> Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate*, 164.

<sup>30</sup> Educational Systems Corporation, quoted in Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate*, 164.

Although we pride ourselves on being a melting pot, observers of the American scene have increasingly commented on our ability to retain aspects of our heritage as a nation of immigrants. This uniquely American knack for fashioning a coherent identity, while preserving ethnicity, is a tremendous source of strength.<sup>31</sup>

ESC's proposal embraced a wider definition of American identity, declaring that it was possible to "preserve ethnicity" and cultural identity while being American. Refugees, then, could be Americans regardless of their ethnicity, religion, culture, or country of origin.

The American response to the Indochinese refugee crisis of the late 1970s, which resulted in the admittance of 400,000 refugees within five years, is stark in contrast to the ongoing American response to the Syrian refugee crisis. The Syrian refugee crisis has its roots in the 2011 Arab Spring protests in Syrian Arab Republic that demanded the resignation of President Bashar al-Assad. The Assad regime responded to the protests with violence, and the conflict quickly shifted into a civil war between forces loyal to Assad and dissidents calling for his removal. Instability in the region allowed the terrorist organization Islamic State (IS) to gain a foothold, thus exacerbating an already devastating conflict.<sup>32</sup> Beginning in late 2015, Russian president Vladimir Putin deployed the Russian air force to support Assad, dramatically shifting the battle for the last urban rebel stronghold of Aleppo in favour of Assad's forces; Aleppo fell in December 2016. The United States, which in October 2015 abandoned a program to train moderate rebels, has yet to stage a direct military intervention in the war.<sup>33</sup>

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the 4.9 million refugees created by the Syrian Civil War are "the biggest refugee population from a single conflict in a generation."<sup>34</sup> The vast majority fled to UN refugee camps in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt, though an estimated 500 000 crossed the Mediterranean in boats in 2015 in hopes of securing asylum in Europe.<sup>35</sup> In 2015, President Obama committed to resettling 10,000 Syrian refugees in the United States over the fiscal year.

The Obama administration's comparatively low commitment to accepting and resettling Syrian refugees, and the hostility of some Americans towards an increase in Syrian refugee resettlement in the United States can be understood as the product of the same factors that created an environment welcoming to Southeast Asian refugees in the late 1970s, namely foreign policy, domestic political culture, and notions of American identity. While the American public felt a duty and responsibility to Southeast Asian refugees in the late 1970s, understanding their plight

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<sup>31</sup> Educational Systems Corporation, quoted in Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate*, 164-165.

<sup>32</sup> Huynh, "Tales of the Boat People," 202.

<sup>33</sup> "Five years of war in Syria" what happened and where we are now," *The Guardian*, March 9, 2016.

<sup>34</sup> "UNHCR: Total number of Syrian refugees exceeds four million for the first time," *UNHCR*, July 9, 2015. <http://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2015/7/559d67d46/unhcr-total-number-syrian-refugees-exceeds-four-million-first-time.html>

<sup>35</sup> "Syria's refugee crisis in numbers," *Amnesty International*, February 3, 2016, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/02/syrias-refugee-crisis-in-numbers/>

as at least partially caused by U.S. interventions in the region, Justin Huynh has argued that the same sense of obligation does not exist toward Syrian refugees; this, in turn, has contributed to the lack of political will to take decisive and dramatic action in aid of refugees. As Huynh writes, a “guilt-driven dynamic largely does not exist for Syrians” because the West has largely not intervened in the Syrian conflict.<sup>36</sup> It is arguable, however, that the conflict in Syria has been exacerbated by American *inaction*. For instance, President Obama decided in 2013 not to launch airstrikes against Syria after Assad deployed chemical weapons against his own people; this despite Obama’s warning to Assad in 2012 that the use of chemical weapons would cross a “red line” triggering American military action.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, the emergence of IS can be at least partly traced to U.S. action in Iraq in 2003.<sup>38</sup> Evidently, the legacies of American military action and inaction abroad have not had as strong a grasp on the memory and conscience of Americans today as it did in the wake of the Vietnam War.

The belief that the plight of Syrian refugees was and is not the responsibility of the United States was expressed on the campaign trail of the 2016 presidential election by Republican candidate Donald Trump who, in September 2015, responded to a *CNN* question about whether the U.S. should welcome refugees fleeing from Syria by suggesting that the United States should instead focus on “our own problems.” “Europe should help. Russia should help. China, they’re not doing anything. The Gulf states are doing nothing. . . . They should all help. And then maybe we could do something.”<sup>39</sup> As assessed by Trump, not only was the United States not obligated to offer refuge to Syrian refugees, but the responsibility for refugees belonged to other countries. Conservative publication the *New Republic* echoed this sentiment on its website, where Ian Tuttle opined that Syrian refugees seeking entry into the United States “have already found refuge elsewhere” in places such as Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon, and Egypt. To offer resettlement to refugees in refugee camps would be akin to offering “greater safety to those who already have it.”<sup>40</sup> For Tuttle, the Syrian refugee crisis had already been handled elsewhere, and required no further intervention by the United States.

As in the case of the Indochinese refugee crisis of the late 1970s, the domestic political culture of the United States in recent years has also had a major impact on attitudes toward Syrian refugees. In particular, concerns over the potential security threat posed by Syrian refugees have animated a considerable amount of the opposition towards granting entry to more individuals. The rhetoric

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<sup>36</sup> Huynh, “Tales of the Boat People,” 228.

<sup>37</sup> Greg Jaffe, “The problem with Obama’s account of the Syrian red-line incident,” *Washington Post*, October 4, 2016. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2016/10/04/the-problem-with-obamas-account-of-the-syrian-red-line-incident/?utm\\_term=.c295daa892b9](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2016/10/04/the-problem-with-obamas-account-of-the-syrian-red-line-incident/?utm_term=.c295daa892b9)

<sup>38</sup> Ian Fisher, “In Rise of ISIS, No Single Missed Key but Many Strands of Blame,” *New York Times*, November 18, 2015. [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/19/world/middleeast/in-rise-of-isis-no-single-missed-key-but-many-strands-of-blame.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/19/world/middleeast/in-rise-of-isis-no-single-missed-key-but-many-strands-of-blame.html?_r=0)

<sup>39</sup> Eugene Scott and Sara Murray, “Donald Trump changes tone on Syrian refugees,” *CNN.com*, September 10, 2015. <http://www.cnn.com/2015/09/10/politics/donald-trump-syrian-refugees/index.html>

<sup>40</sup> Ian Tuttle, “There are Serious, Unbigoted Reasons to be Wary of a Flood of Syrian Refugees,” *National Review Online*, November 18, 2015. <http://www.nationalreview.com/syrian-refugees-arent-1939s-jews>



of some primary candidates for the Republican nomination for the presidential election well reflects this concern. Carly Fiorina urged caution, warning “We are having to be very careful about who we let enter this country from these war torn regions to ensure that terrorists are not coming here.” Senator Marco Rubio made his support for increasing the number of admitted refugees conditional upon a program “done in a way that allows us to ensure that among them are not infiltrated – people who were, you know, part of a terrorist organization that are using this crisis.” Rand Paul warned of future consequences, noting “We did this with Iraq . . . we accepted 60,000 Iraqi refugees into our country, some of which wished us harm and tried to attack us. Same way with Somalia . . . many of them are from the faction going back to Syria to fight against us.”<sup>41</sup> For these candidates, support for the resettlement of Syrian refugees was moderated by fear that terrorists might infiltrate the refugee population and gain entry to the United States. Despite the White House’s assurances that “refugees undergo more rigorous screening than anyone else we allow into the United States” in a process that includes the United Nations and federal intelligence and security agencies, the rhetoric of these candidates both voiced a concern felt by portions of the American populace, while continuing to stoke fear of refugees.<sup>42</sup>

A particularly notable case in which the perceived threat of Syrian refugees to American security was prominent in domestic political discourse was in the aftermath of the November 2015 terror attacks in Paris that killed 129 people. In response, thirty-one U.S. state governors, released statements indicating their desire to ban the resettlement of Syrian refugees in their state, despite their lack of authority to enact any such ban. Texas Governor Greg Abbott stated that his government was “working on measures to ensure . . . that Texans will be kept safe from those refugees.” In a letter to President Obama, he linked his concerns to the fact that, “a Syrian ‘refugee’ appears to have been part of the Paris terror attack,” presumably referring to reports that a Syrian passport, later found to be forged, was found near the body of one suicide bomber near the Stade de France.<sup>43</sup> In focusing on the potential threat Syrian refugees might pose to Americans at home, these politicians redirected attention from the suffering of Syrian refugees to the theoretical suffering of the American people. In discussing refugees who flee by boat, Michael Pugh has described this reaction of destination countries as an “invers[ion] [of] the risks. . . . In effect the issue is displayed as a threat to security rather than to people whose security is threatened.”<sup>44</sup> A political discourse with a ceaseless focus on the protection of

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<sup>41</sup> Stephanie Condon, “Where the 2016 candidates stand on the Syrian refugee crisis,” *CBSnews.com*, September 9, 2015. <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/where-the-2016-candidates-stand-on-the-syrian-refugee-crisis/>

<sup>42</sup> Amy Pope, “Infographic: The Screening Process for Refugee Entry into the United States,” *Whitehouse.gov*, November 20, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2015/11/20/infographic-screening-process-refugee-entry-united-states>

<sup>43</sup> Leigh Ann Caldwell, “More Governors Seek to Ban Syrian Refugees After Paris Massacre,” *NBCNews.com*, November 17, 2015. <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/paris-terror-attacks/texas-gov-greg-abbott-we-wont-accept-syrian-refugees-after-n464221>

<sup>44</sup> Michael Pugh, “Drowning Not Waving: Boat People and Humanitarianism at Sea,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 17, no. 1 (2004): 55.

Americans from the dark, unknown danger of a refugee mass thus served to divert attention away from the plight and suffering of refugees themselves.

In my discussion of American attitudes toward Indochinese refugees during the late 1970s, I suggested that a newly expanded conception of American identity that allowed for ethnic and cultural diversity helped to create a national discourse that was more welcoming to Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian refugees. The opposite has been true in regard to the Syrian refugee crisis due to a growth of anti-Muslim rhetoric that suggests that Syrian refugees, and Muslims more broadly, are inherently unable to assimilate to American culture. In 2015, while speaking at a rally in Sioux City, Iowa, with Republican presidential primary candidate Senator Ted Cruz, Congressman Steve King criticized the idea that Syrian refugees should be resettled in the United States, claiming, “I can’t find models of the folks that, let’s say do the Hajj to Mecca, I can’t find models where they’ve assimilated into the broader culture and civilization of wherever they’ve gone.” This supposedly historical inability to assimilate, King suggested, meant that Syrian Muslims were fundamentally unfit to live in the United States. Instead, King proposed,

[T]he refugees that come out of Iraq and out of Syria: first, I’d train them and say ‘go back and defend your country.’ Give them uniforms . . . but if you can’t get them to do that then send them to Saudi Arabia where they have the air-conditioned tents at Mecca. Those tents are not busy for 11 months out of the year and they would assimilate into that culture like a hand into a glove.<sup>45</sup>

King’s statements suggested that Syrian refugees, and Syrian Muslim refugees in particular, were not, and could not become, American, as their ethnicity, culture, and religion precluded them from King’s definition of American identity.

The contention that Syrian refugees were un-American emerged also in the *National Review Online*. In evaluating other news outlets’ comparisons of the Syrian refugee crisis to the pre-World War II Jewish refugees who fled Nazi Germany, Ian Tuttle declared the comparison ill founded, because “European Jews in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were more amenable to assimilation than are Syrian Muslims in the early 21<sup>st</sup>.” While “Jews had participated in the intellectual and cultural life of Germany for a century and a half” and lived “under the broad banner of Western civilization,” Syrians had not. “The intellectual, cultural, and political traditions of Syria are not in concert with those of the West,” Tuttle declared, “and it would be foolish to think that that does not matter.”<sup>46</sup> Writing for the same publication, Congressman Brian Babin warned that by allowing Syrian refugees to enter the country, the United States was at risk of the “tragic situation” that had developed in Europe, namely that “[m]illions of unassimilated Middle Eastern immigrants and refugees now live in Europe in what are essentially ‘no-go zones’ where police

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<sup>45</sup> Matthew Patane, “Group blasts Steve King statements on Syrian refugees,” *Des Moines Register*, October 13, 2015, <http://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/politics/2015/10/13/group-blasts-steve-king-statements-syrian-refugees/73885770/>

<sup>46</sup> Tuttle, “There Are Serious, Unbigoted Reasons to be Wary of a Flood of Syrian Refugees.”

fear to enter, sharia law essentially rules – and future jihadis are radicalized.”<sup>47</sup> Through these baseless claims of “no-go zones,” Babin appealed to fears of terrorist activity and suggested that Syrian refugees would be unable to integrate into American society, and should thus be rejected by the country.

Though the American response towards Southeast Asian refugees fleeing authoritarian regimes in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia during the late 1970s was very different in scale to the ongoing American response to Syrian refugees fleeing civil war, both reactions, one of mass welcome, and one of extremely cautionary restriction, were shaped by conceptions of foreign policy, ongoing discourses in domestic political culture, and shifting definitions of American identity. During the late 1970s, the differing foreign policy aspirations of liberals and neoconservatives found common ground in supporting human rights; domestic political culture fostered a sense of responsibility for the welfare of Southeast Asians and for individual rights concerns more broadly; and a widening conception of American identity was inclusive of diverse groups. More recently, American foreign policy has placed the nation on the sidelines of the war that created the Syrian refugee population; domestic discourse has promoted fear and anxiety toward outsiders; and the definition of American identity has become exclusionary. As such, for Syrian refugees, the sentiment of words inscribed at the base of the Statue of Liberty, promising refuge to “your tired, your poor, your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free,” remains unfulfilled.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Brian Babin, “America’s Refugee Program: A Clear and Present Danger,” *National Review Online*, August 18, 2016, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/439122/syrian-refugee-program-national-security-risk-must-reform-now>

<sup>48</sup> Emma Lazarus, “The New Colossus,” *National Park Service*, <https://www.nps.gov/stli/learn/historyculture/colossus.htm>.

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